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Which Are the Most Important Dictionary Skills?

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Research has indicated that both teachers and elementary school children are likely to have many erroneous ideas about the dictionary and little understanding of how to use it correctly. To establish priority in dictionary skills that a child should master first and best, one staff member from each of four dictionary companies was asked to rate various dictionary matter pertaining to (1) pronunciation, (2) location of dictionary material, (3) spelling, (4) word meaning, and (5) facts concerning the history and structure of the dictionary. A five-point bipolar, open-ended rating scale was used (the five choices varied from "not needed at all" to "indispensable"). If 50% of the jury scored an item as useful, that item was considered significant to know. The results of the ratings were arranged in list form and rank order. Using this list, a teacher can begin dictionary study with the most important items in each area and ignore those which were considered not important. (The list of dictionary skills is included.) (LH)

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MORRIS LEON MOWER AND LEROY BARNEY

Which Are the Most Important Dictionary Skills?

The dictionary is very likely the most used and least understood of all the books in the elementary school. Hulbert (1) states that no reference book of any kind except the Bible is so widely used as is the dictionary. Despite much experience with dictionaries, however, elementary school children, parents, and even teachers are likely to have many erroneous ideas about and little understanding of the dictionary and how to interpret it correctly.

Nor is the situation improving with prospective teachers-in-training. Research by Mower (2) illuminates that the elementary education majors at institutions of higher learning in Utah are not as well prepared in their knowledge of dictionary matter as elementary teachers and dictionary authorities judged that they should be.

It is commonly recognized that the dictionary as a reference has a unique position among books. Strickland (4) states that for the school child there are books of many kinds and for many purposes, but the one which tells most about his language is the dictionary. In short, the study of dictionary skills is very important for elementary majors-in-training, for elementary teachers, for elementary children, and for the general public.

It is very likely, unfortunately, that past training has been incorrectly emphasized. Weidman (5) seems to have expressed what happened when he stated:

> Possibly the publishers of dictionaries have been assuming a skill on the part of teachers in using this reference tool that was not actually present. I suppose we have been so concerned with students gaining dictionary use-skills that we have overlooked those upon whom we have depended to teach these skills.

Perhaps it would be well to review the kinds of dictionary skills which teachers should know. Teachers should have a priority list to know what to teach first and best (an application of the social utility theory). To reduce private opinion to a minimum and to add strength to such a list, it would be best if we could call upon a panel of authorities to lend their judgment as to that which is most important.

Selection of Dictionary Authorities

Authorities from dictionary companies were selected because of their reputation and activity in the field of dictionary publishing. The November, 1963, *Consumer Reports* (3) magazine identified the following as the leading publishers of "college or desk-size" dictionaries in the United States today: Random House, Funk and Wagnalls Company, G. & C. Merriam Company, and the World Publishing Company.

Each of the companies was asked to recommend qualified individuals on its staff to represent its company as authorities on

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dictionary structure and usage. The jury members, empaneled by the respective companies, were as follows:

1. *American College Dictionary* (Random House, Inc.). Jess Stein, Vice-President.
2. *Standard College Dictionary* (Funk and Wagnalls Company, Inc.). Albert H. Marckwardt, Princeton University; Frederic G. Cassidy, University of Wisconsin; S. I. Hayakawa, San Francisco State College; and James B. McMillan, University of Alabama.
3. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (The World Publishing Company). David B. Guralnik, Editor; Samuel Solomon, Supervising Associate Editor; Clark C. Livensparger, Assistant Editor.
4. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (G. and C. Merriam and Company). Victor W. Weidman, Vice-President and Educational Department Manager; Donald F. Miller, Assistant Director Educational Department.

The Rating Scale

A five-point bipolar, open-ended rating scale was constructed to measure the various dictionary matter related to pronunciation, location, spelling, meaning, and facts concerning the history and structure of the dictionary. Items included in the rating scale were identified by analyzing courses of study, dictionaries, and selected tests which claimed to measure understandings of dictionary matter. The five points on the rating scale were as follows: (1) not needed at all, (2) seldom necessary, (3) useful, (4) fundamental, and (5) indispensable.

The rating scale was submitted to the selected jury of dictionary authorities. If 50 percent or more than 50 percent of the authorities selected an item as being useful, fundamental, or indispensable, that item was construed to be important to know.

In each of the tables which follow, the items reflect the rank order of preference by the dictionary judges. For instance, the first item in Table 1, "Know the pronunciation key of the dictionary being used," was ranked as most important of the pronunciation skills by the majority of judges. In "Total Responses" column is listed the aggregate responses by the dictionary judges. For instance, the item "Know the pronunciation key of the dictionary being used" was considered "fundamental" by two judges and "indispensable" by eight judges.

In the "Percentage of Total Response" column is listed the aggregate percentage of response by the dictionary judges. For instance, in the item "Know correct pronunciation is regional" was considered by 30 percent of the judges as "fundamental" and 70 percent of the judges as indispensable.

TABLE 1
The Ratings Given by Dictionary Authorities to Certain Items of Dictionary Matter Pertaining to Pronunciation

Number	*Item*	*Total Responses*					*Percentage of Total Response*				
		1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
1.	Know pron. key being used	0	0	0	2	8	00	00	00	20	80
2.	Know corr. pron. is regional	0	0	0	3	7	00	00	00	30	70
3.	Pron. are usage reports	0	0	0	3	7	00	00	00	30	70
4.	No dict. gives all pron.	0	0	1	7	2	00	00	10	70	20
5.	Pronunciation keys vary	0	0	1	5	4	00	00	10	50	40
6.	Alternate pronunciation	0	1	2	4	3	00	10	20	40	30
7.	Run-on entry pron. omitted	0	0	4	3	3	00	00	40	30	30

8. Enclosures for pronunciation	2	0	4	3	1	20	00	40	30	10
9. Pronunciation preference	0	2	2	3	3	00	20	20	30	30
10. Name diacritics	0	2	5	1	2	00	20	50	10	20
11. Interpret diacritics	0	3	4	1	2	00	30	40	10	20
12. Recog. symb. of non-Eng. sd.	1	5	4	0	0	10	50	40	00	00
13. Pronounce non-Eng. sounds	1	5	4	0	0	10	50	40	00	00

TABLE 2

The Ratings Given by Dictionary Authorities to Certain Items of Dictionary Matter Pertaining to Location

		Total Responses					*Percentage of Total Response*				
Number	*Item*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
1.	Know loc. of pron. keys	0	0	0	2	8	00	00	00	20	80
2.	Alphabetical order	0	0	1	1	8	00	00	10	10	80
3.	Locate idioms	0	0	3	1	6	00	00	30	10	60
4.	Loc. wd. with various prefix	0	0	2	3	5	00	00	20	30	50
5.	Locate run-on entry of words	0	0	3	2	5	00	00	30	20	50
6.	Function of guide words	0	0	4	2	4	00	00	40	20	40
7.	Loc. inflect. forms of words	0	0	2	5	3	00	00	20	50	30
8.	Function of root words	0	0	3	4	3	00	00	30	40	30
9.	Table of contents of dict.	1	2	3	1	3	10	20	30	10	30
10.	Locate encyclopedic material	1	1	4	2	2	10	10	40	20	20

TABLE 3

The Ratings Given by Dictionary Authorities to Certain Items of Dictionary Matter Pertaining to Meaning Selection

		Total Responses					*Percentage of Total Response*				
Number	*Item*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
1.	Select mng. to fit context	0	0	0	0	10	00	00	00	00	100
2.	Status or usage labels	0	1	1	0	8	00	10	10	00	80
3.	Interpret status labels	0	1	1	0	8	00	10	10	00	80
4.	Pts. of speech abbrev.	0	0	1	2	7	00	00	10	20	70
5.	Know each def. is numbered under diff. parts of speech	0	0	2	2	6	00	00	20	20	60
6.	Adapt dict. def. to context	0	0	1	4	5	00	00	10	40	50
7.	Interpret figurative mngs.	0	0	2	3	5	00	00	20	30	50
8.	Relate idioms to lit. mngs.	0	0	2	4	4	00	00	20	40	40
9.	Identify verbal illus.	0	0	3	3	4	00	00	30	30	40
10.	Apply vbl. illus. to def.	0	0	3	3	4	00	00	30	30	40
11.	Use cross references	0	0	4	4	2	00	00	40	40	20
12.	Know metaphysical meanings	0	0	7	1	2	00	00	70	10	20
13.	Identify etymological data	0	3	5	0	2	00	30	50	00	20
14.	Interpret etymological data	0	2	6	1	1	00	20	60	10	10
15.	Inter, num. accomp. illus.	0	1	7	2	0	00	10	70	20	00

TABLE 4

The Ratings Given by Dictionary Authorities to Certain Items of Dictionary Matter Pertaining to Spelling

		Total Responses					*Percentage of Total Response*				
Number	*Item*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
1.	Alternate spellings	0	0	1	0	9	00	00	10	00	90
2.	Sp. basis is custom & usage	0	0	0	2	8	00	00	00	20	80
3.	Locate plural spellings	0	0	0	3	7	00	00	00	30	70
4.	Dict. gives princ. pt. of v.	0	0	0	3	7	00	00	00	30	70
5.	Dict. shows capitalization	1	0	0	2	7	10	00	00	20	70
6.	Homographs	0	0	1	3	6	00	00	10	30	60
7.	Dict. shows syll. of words	0	0	2	2	6	00	00	20	20	60

8. Plural formation (s & es)	0	0	2	3	5	00	00	20	30	50
9. Diff. syll. in phon. re-sp.	0	0	2	3	5	00	00	20	30	50
10. Words used as ant. & syn.	0	0	0	6	4	00	00	00	60	40
11. Brit. & Am. spelling diff.	0	0	3	3	4	00	00	30	30	40
12. Dict. treatment of homographs, ant., syn.	0	0	3	4	3	00	00	30	40	30
13. Sp. chge. slower than pron.	0	0	3	4	3	00	00	30	40	30
14. Dash mark to divide words	1	0	3	3	3	10	00	30	30	30
15. Hyphenation not standard	0	0	5	2	3	00	00	50	20	30
16. Hyphen. basis—syntax & mng.	0	1	6	2	1	00	10	60	20	10

TABLE 5

The Ratings Given by Dictionary Authorities to Certain Items of Dictionary Matter Pertaining to History and Structure of the Dictionary

		Total Responses					*Percentage of Total Response*				
Number	*Item*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
1.	Dict. is guide, not rule bk.	0	0	0	3	7	00	00	00	30	70
2.	Dict. records contem. usage	0	1	1	3	5	00	10	10	30	50
3.	Know new & old mat. at rev.	0	1	2	3	4	00	10	20	30	40
4.	Know dict.—scope, etc.	0	3	3	1	3	00	30	30	10	30
5.	Know history English lang.	0	2	7	0	1	00	20	70	00	10
6.	Know Eng. dict. development	1	6	2	0	1	10	60	20	00	10
7.	Know import. lexicographers	4	3	2	1	0	40	30	20	10	00

Not Important to Know

In the pronunciation skills, two items were considered not important to know: "Recognize symbols used for non-English sounds," and "Be able to pronounce the non-English sounds."

In the location skills, meaning skills, or spelling skills, no item was judged as unimportant to know.

In the history and structure skills, two items were considered not important to know: "Know important lexicographers and their contributions to the dictionary" and "Have a knowledge of the history of the English dictionary development."

Conclusions

The implications of this study are obvious. Each major area of the dictionary has specific skills which should be taught. Some of these skills, however, are far more important than others. Applying the criteria of the social utility theory, those things which are most important should be taught first. This study identifies those items which are most important and tabulates them in list form and in rank order. Obviously, if a child learns all of the items in the list prior to leaving the sixth grade, he will be well prepared in dictionary skills, and thus we will have a citizenry more enlightened in the use of the most important reference work: the dictionary.

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